

A SOUVENIR

Presentation of the Lincoln Bronze Tablet

THE GETTYSBURG SPEECH

Lake Geneva, Wis., November 22, 1907.

By JOHN E. BURTON, Principal of Schools, 1870 to 1873.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN was the best man the world has yet produced.

Best because he was *all man* and made *no claim to divinity or superiority* through a royal lineage.

What he was, we may be; what a royal ruler is we may not be, because of birth; what a divine teacher is we may not be, as we are not of the family of the gods. Lincoln was a plain American who loved his whole country, North and South; his people and his duty. He saved this mighty Union, and our great future will always be *his* glory.

He has no ancestors and no successors. His mantle has fallen on no one. *He stands absolutely alone*, unique in his love of man, in his matchless devotion to principle, in his pure yet kingly character, and beautiful to the point of eternal adoration in his sad though Christ-like martyrdom.

In his rugged veins was the ichor of absolute integrity and simple sincerity.

His standards were *plain*. He knew men and believed in men. He said: "*If slavery is not wrong, then nothing is wrong.*" He hated that wrong and had registered his vow when a young man in the New Orleans slave market when he saw young women sold on the auction block: "Boys, it is not right for one man to own and sell another man. It is wrong, and if I ever get a chance to hit it, by God, I'll hit it hard."

Yet he so loved and respected the integrity of law that when, through Secretary Seward, he negotiated for the services of old Garibaldi, the world's warrior for liberty, from the king of Italy and found the old soldier could get honorable release from the king and offered to come and take command of our American armies after General Scott; yet when he was told that the only condition of Garibaldi's service demanded the power as a military leader to declare all slaves free *whenever his judgment decided*, Lincoln said: "No! This war is for the preservation of our Union, and until it is proved that the Union cannot be saved without destroying slavery, no man has a lawful right or power to declare a slave free." Thus he refused the needed services of the victorious warrior of two worlds rather than place himself against established law and the constitution. So, too, he checked the old pathfinder, General John C. Fremont,

who would have followed the ideals of Garibaldi. Lincoln looked over the heads of every man and actor in the world's drama and saw the end from the outset.

His character is far greater than his Proclamation of Emancipation and will long outlive it. What Shakespeare is to literature, Lincoln is to statesmanship. What the ocean is to lakes and rivers, Lincoln's character is to other men. *He knew slavery must die*; but he so loved the Union that he resolved that in its death struggle it should not have the fatal satisfaction of tearing down the Union and building again a slave hierarchy upon its glorious ruins. *This was his almost divine mission*:—To take the helm amid the black storm of rebellion, with the roar and crash of lightning and thunder about him, and guide the quivering ship of state safely between the two jutting rocks, either of which would wreck us forever and leave an everlasting heritage of warring interests neutralized and made powerless by strife and to some day ~~fall~~ fall the prey of power to some European master.

Only a little over a year had elapsed since John Brown had madly struck his unlawful blow at slavery at Harper's Ferry and paid for his rash but godlike devotion with the penalty of his brave life. The Abolitionists everywhere pressed Lincoln and blamed him for not acting John Brown on a national scale.

Lincoln felt the truth and realized all; *but time must ripen events*, and so, like the soul of courage that he was, he waited God's time and took the censure and the blame cheerfully, *and still he waited on*. He saw in John Brown's death the clear handwriting of history on the wall of fate.

He saw it in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps,
He saw the builded altar in the evening dews and damps,
He read the righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps,
That Truth was marching on.

He lived in the serious days of our Republic. He had made his national debates with the artful but loyal Douglas and had made the people take notice of the approaching conflict which Seward had made famous as "*irrepressible*." He had made the people believe *he was right and Douglas wrong*. He had lost the United States senatorship, but had become the logical and destined leader of Freedom, and two years later was the lawful ruler of the nation.

Born in a slave state, his early boyhood friends and his associates in Kentucky and Indiana and Southern Illinois were all on the border line, and he knew the mettle and temper of slavery, of slaveholders and of the Southern cavalier's spirit and pride.

Thus by training and experience he could estimate and measure the overwhelming problem better than the Abolitionist of New England or the idealist like Fremont, Hunter and Garibaldi.

Lincoln loved the South but hated its slavery. He dreaded the Abolitionists of the North, but he knew that behind them was the everlasting principle of right.

So with full and matured knowledge of the awful solution before him, he entered the earnest years of war that no man could hinder, resolved to meet his duty even to his death. I care not to review those tragic days:—We are in the autumn of 1863 and the travail of sorrow and blood is upon his great heart and he yearns for relief and rest. *That cannot be. The war must go on.* The battlefield of Gettysburg,

drenched with the blood of 50,000 dead and wounded men who four short months ago had fallen there, lay before him and around him. The orator Edward Everett could not feel what Lincoln felt.

He spoke but a few moments, but his towering love, his yearning soul, his unfaltering faith in his country, all came forth in the immortal words of that speech which will be forever, to you and to me, in all our coming future, the great dedication of devotion, the Magna Charta of sincerity and courage and the everlasting Gospel of Patriotism to all the living and to all who are yet to be.

In the classic bronze, in what men call fadeless and enduring bronze, backed by the marble which will withstand the ravages of long centuries; devised by the loving hearts of the Grand Army of the Republic and whose hallowed influence goes with it, whose white haired members faced grim death on this decisive battlefield; this tablet of beauty and glory, I present you in kindness and as a former principal of these schools, conscious and happy in knowing that when you and I are gone and when marble and bronze are crumbled and corroded, the never-dying truth of this patriotic and inspiring classic, *by the Man of Men, will still endure and live on to bless and guide others in a civilization higher and better than ours.*

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "John C. Burton". The signature is written in dark ink and features a large, sweeping flourish that extends from the end of the name across the bottom of the page.

